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ABSTRACT

Although some people fantasize about their spouse's possible death, the literature contains no reports of research on widowhood fantasies. The incidence, characteristics, and possible function of these fantasies were examined in individual interviews with 28 divorced and married men and women. Interview data were analyzed by calculating chi-square values to determine the degree of relationship between each of three variables (gender, marital status, dominance in marital decisions) and each of three aspects of widowhood fantasies (frequency, content, timing). All three aspects of fantasies were significantly related to gender; frequency was significantly related to dominance in marital decisions. Women reported more regular incidence of widowhood fantasies than men. Most women imagined death by accident or natural causes, and almost all reported occurrence after arguments or when contemplating divorce. Men's responses were approximately equally distributed among frequency categories. Most men imagined their spouse's death by murder or suicide; five men reported never thinking about their wife's death. The response patterns suggest that widowhood fantasies serve as a coping device for marital dissatisfaction primarily for women, but also for dominated men. (Author/NRB)

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WIDOWHOOD FANTASIES: INCIDENCE, CHARACTERISTICS, AND POTENTIAL FUNCTION

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The Problem

In clinical and social settings, divorced women have confided in the authors thoughts and fantasies about their mate or former mate's possible death which they had during their marriage. Many express anxiety about such images, and relief to learn that others share such thoughts. Surprisingly, the literature contains no reports of research concerning "widowhood" fantasies. A review of theoretical literature indicates no specific accounts of the possible function of such fantasies.

Assuming that thoughts about potential widowhood serve the same function as fantasies in general (i.e., providing an outlet for frustration or rehearsal for future action), "widowhood" fantasies should occur with greater frequency and/or different content and timing among frustrated or dominated individuals. Reportedly, women are more likely to be dominated in marriage, and presumably would report more such fantasies because they feel less able to directly express feelings of anger or disappointment. These fantasies should also occur more often among persons considering divorce, or be reported as such in retrospect by persons who are divorced.

Subjects

To determine whether these fantasies do occur more often in women

and divorced persons, we interviewed 28 divorced and married men and women (7 in each category). All were employed as professional or clerical staff in a university, and all volunteered to talk about "intimate aspects" of their current or former marital relationship. All mates and former mates of the respondents were still living.

Procedure

In individual interviews, the authors obtained information in two areas: who makes/made decisions in general, and in housing, money, leisure, and sexual intimacy; and the existence and frequency of thoughts about the mate's possible death, how the death might occur, and specific events associated with these thoughts. Parallel forms of the interview were used, with divorced persons recalling experiences and feelings during their marriage.

Dominance in marital decisions

Questions about decision-making forced the respondent to estimate percentages of decisions made by self and by mate. Each of the five decision areas was scored for dominant decision-maker:

self = self decided 65% or more;

shared = self decided 36-64%;

mate = self decided 35% or less.

Each respondent was then categorized for dominance in marital decisions according to the pattern of scores in the five decision areas:

Dominant Self = more areas scored self than scored mate;

Shared/Mixed = equal number of areas scored self and mate or all areas scored as shared;

Dominant Mate = more areas scored mate than scored self.

Frequency of "widowhood" fantasies

Questions concerning thoughts about the mate's death were openended. Responses were later categorized on three dimensions: frequency, content, and timing.

Respondents did not always make firm statements of frequency of fantasies; the combination of qualitative and quantified responses were categorized very loosely;

Regularly includes such answers as "often", "a lot", and "all the time", as well as references to monthly or more often;

Sometimes includes "rarely", "occasionally", and indications of not more than several times a year;

Never includes only the responses "no" and "never".

Content of "Widowhood" fantasies

Descriptions of how the death might occur were more specific:

Motivated - murder or suicide

Nonmotivated = accident, natural causes

No Content = never thought of how it might happen

When both motivated and nonmotivated deaths were described, the more extreme response (murder or suicide) was scored.

Timing of "Widowhood" fantasies

Respondents also gave multiple answers to the question of whether these thoughts occurred after a particular event. Again, the more extreme category was scored (plans for divorce are more extreme, we reasoned, than arguments, etc):

Divorce = related to thoughts of or actual plans for divorce;

Other negative = related to an argument, or to anger or hurt due to mate's behavior;

Realistic = related to mate's serious illness or accident, family history, or mate's attempted suicide;

Indefinite = not related to any particular event.

Results

We expected three variables to be associated with "widowhood" fantasies: gender, marital status, and dominance in marital decisions.* We calculated chi-square values to determine the degree of relationship between each of these three variables and each of the three aspects of "widowhood" fantasies.

Four of the nine chi-square values were significant ($p < .10$). All three aspects of "widowhood" fantasies were related to gender; frequency of such thoughts were significantly related to dominance in marital decisions.

Women reported more regular incidence of "widowhood" fantasies; none of the women reported never having such thoughts. Men's responses were approximately equally distributed among the three categories, including five who reported never thinking about their wife's death.

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*Dominance in decision-making was significantly related to gender, as expected. The Dominant Mate category in this study includes one male; the Mixed/Shared category, four males.

Among the 14 women interviewed, 9 reported imagining accidents or natural causes, and 4 said they never thought of how the death might occur; only one woman reported imagining her husband's murder. Among the 9 men who reported having such thoughts, 5 reported imagining murder or suicide, 3 had thoughts of accidents or natural deaths, and only one reported not imagining how the death might occur.

None of the women reported fantasies unrelated to events: 4 said they occurred around thoughts of plans for divorce, and 8 after arguments or other negative marital experiences. Men's responses were distributed approximately equally among the four categories, with 3 men reporting "widowhood" fantasies unrelated to any specific events.

The combined group of men and women who reported that they were dominant or that decision-making was shared, reported more frequent "widowhood" fantasies; among the six who reported that their mate was dominant, none reported never having such fantasies, but only one reported frequent or regular thoughts about the mate's death.

Conclusions

"Widowhood" fantasies are clearly commonplace among women, and among men who believe their wife makes most of the marital decisions. Women also tend to experience such thoughts in relationship to divorce or divorce plans, and other negative interpersonal events in the marriage. But women report less extreme content or no content.

This pattern of responses suggests that "widowhood" fantasies do serve as a device for women and for dominated men to deal covertly with marital dissatisfaction. This dominance apparently extends into fantasy, preventing women from experiencing the degree of imagery which

men report about how the death might occur.

These findings have major implications, especially for women who might be considering divorce and those who are so anxious about such thoughts that they need help in using their fantasies constructively.